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# WAR IS OVER

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## WAR IS OVER

We called him the TV-watcher, and he lived up to his name. Budweiser in hand, chair reclined, he would watch endless hours of dramas, soap operas, and the news, all with equal disenchantment. He had raised eight children; in his mind, their children were static over the crystal-clear picture of retirement.

Only the past could bring him to the present.

I sat in his dining room, dusty and cluttered with the chaos of too many years of too many lives in one place, twisting side to side in one of the squeaking chairs and attempting to ask my grandmother about Her Experiences with History. The project, well-intended by my history teacher, involved reading from a list of questions about famous world events as my grandparents had experienced them, and I was yawning my way through them with disinterest.

“Grandma,” I asked the grey-haired woman in the equally squeaky chair, “What is the scariest event you ever lived through?” I stumbled on the words, covered by my too-big handwriting where I’d scrawled down other answers.

If I had been a more self-aware child, I might have noticed how her brows puckered when she began to speak. “The bombing of Pearl Harbor, when I was just a little girl...”

She was interrupted by the slam of a refrigerator door: TV watcher was in their tiny kitchen, rummaging among the disorder for another beer. As usual, he seemed not to hear her, or notice me.

“Everyone in Pittsburgh was from somewhere else, my parents included. When we heard about it, happening here, in America, well... We were in shock.”

I nodded along, trying to write as fast as she was talking, losing bits of my pencil tip all over the table in my rush, pushing too hard. I wanted the grade, not the story.

A shuffle, behind me, interrupted her.

“Aren’t you going to tell her about the food rations?” Said a gruff voice.

The TV watcher looked at me over his spectacles, and his eyes were almost kind. In his hands he held a small shoebox, beaten and weathered, freshly dragged from some corner of the house I had most likely never seen. Shuffling forward, he placed himself in an empty plastic chair between the two of us, and lifted the lid.

Out of it came papers, one after the other, brightly colored in their day, but now faded with age. He handled each, I now realize, with extreme care. I wish I could say the same: As he handed them to me and I leafed through them, I stared at each printed number and picture, the age spots.

“For the store on Friendship Avenue,” he said quietly. “Once the war got going, we all had to give things up. You could only have so much, see. These are leftovers, but you could only have so much bread, milk... Butter, oh, we never had butter.”

He was saying more words to me than I had ever heard him say. My pencil had fallen out of my hand: In that moment, I could only see the paper.

“Do you remember the soap rations?” My grandmother asked him tenderly. They caressed the books before handing them to me. He was nodding, quietly.

“Our families used to grow vegetable gardens...”

“Victory gardens?” I asked him. He hummed some approximation of a song, something I assumed he remembered from those days, in reply.

“Sacrifice, it was all about sacrifice...”

I wish I had written down the words he said, that day. He and my grandmother explained to me the fear of an attack on one’s home country (a fear I would soon learn, sitting in a fifth grade classroom while New York grieved and the world grieved for New York and for freedom) and the all-consuming terror of being young and losing a ration book in the Pittsburgh street, only to return home without the needed food for a family of five and to be boxed around the ears by a mother whose love was so strong she could only scold in Irish. He dug to the bottom of the box and produced other things: Their marriage certificate, with stories of a losing their car in a field of Chevy’s on the night of their first date; immigration papers, with a proud sigh, for his parents; and, finally, a newspaper clipping: WAR IS OVER, I read.

He let me take one of the ration books to school. I was amazed at my teacher’s amazement, amazed at the gift I had been given, and properly ashamed of the chocolate milk on its corner when I took it back.

“The gift of a new generation” he said with a shrug, and put it back in the shoebox before going back to his soaps. In that moment, I wish I had asked him for another part of his story, but the door seemed to close, with no hope of remaining ajar.

I wish I could say I asked him, before he died, if I could copy those documents. Sadly, the shoebox has not resurfaced, nor will its stories. Just one more time, I’d like to hear him say “WAR IS OVER” and hand me a ration book, to remind me of the things we think we can go without.